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INFO RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 9622
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 1483
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 8920
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 7765
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1617
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000198

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SUBJECT: SENIOR FIGURES FROM BOTH PARTIES ARRESTED

Classified By: DCM Geeta Pasi, reason para 1.4 d.

¶1. (C) Summary. Seven former ministers and at least nine other senior figures from both major political parties have been arrested, apparently on suspicion of corruption. Tariq Rahman, the son of the former prime minister, is reportedly hunkered down at home and may face imminent arrest. Popular reaction is overwhelmingly positive. End Summary.

The Big Fish Finally Get Reeled In

¶2. (C) In pre-dawn raids the nights of February 3 and 4, security forces arrested at least 13 senior political figures from both the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the Awami League. The government has made no official announcement about the arrests, but all of the detainees have reputations of corrupt and other illicit behavior. According to local press reports and political party contacts, the key detainees are:

From the Bangladesh Nationalist Party

A) Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury, ex-MP and confidant of party leader Begum Khaleda Zia. Political opponents accuse him of "war crimes" during the 1971 war of independence, but he has long been alleged to be involved in gun running, gold smuggling, extortion, and political violence.

B) Nazmul Huda, former Communications Minister and reputedly one the most corrupt members of her the last cabinet. Also close to Zia.

C) Mosadek Ali Falu: ex-MP and media mogul, banker, and business tycoon. He began as a tea server to Khaleda Zia in her first term as prime minister and worked his way up to become one of Zia's political secretaries as a result of their close relationship.

D) Iqbal Hasan Madhmoond, former state minister for power. Reportedly manipulated power generation contracts to benefit interests linked to Tariq Rahman.

E) Ruhul Quddus Talukdar Dulu, former state minister for land and widely alleged patron of Bangla Bhai, the self-styled Islamist vigilante who emerged as a senior leader of Jamaatul Mujahidin Bangladesh during its campaign of terror in the second half of 2005. Protected by Zia as a vital regional leader for the BNP. His detention may be related to his Bangla Bhai connections instead of corruption.

F) Mir Mohammad Nasir, former state minister for tourism and civil aviation. A former military officer and ambassador to Saudi Arabia who allegedly served as a conduit to Zia for Saudi money and messages. A Zia intimate, he lost his cabinet position after losing badly the Chittagong mayoral race in 2005.

G) Naser Rahman, ex-MP and son of former finance minister Saifur Rahman. Publicly accused by party rivals of being massively corrupt, Saifur's stout defense of his son greatly damaged his reputation among Bangladeshis and foreign donors.

H) Ammanullah Aman, ex-MP and reputed deal-maker for Tariq Rahman.

From the Awami League

A) Mohammad Nasim, home minister in the last Awami League government with a reputation for corruption and violence.

B) Salman Rahman, Advisory Council member. One of the country's biggest industrialists, Rahman is allegedly one of Bangladesh's biggest bank loan defaulters.

C) Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir, a former state minister.

Tariq Not Arrested--Yet

¶3. (C) Reports late February 3 that Tariq Rahman had been arrested are apparently false. Party and press contacts report that Tariq has been hunkered down at his residence for several days and that his arrest may be imminent.

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Reaction

¶4. (SBU) Initial popular reaction has been overwhelmingly positive, but political leaders from all parties are more circumspect. Echoing some leaders of civil society, they have called for the government to levy specific charges against detainees and to accord them full due process, including trial if appropriate. Asian Development Bank representative Hua Du publicly welcomed the arrests, saying corrupt politicians had blocked implementation of bank projects.

The Numbers

¶5. (SBU) The numbers of those detained, subsequently released, freed on bail, and still in custody are hard to determine because of the absence of official information. However, police contacts, press reports, and a local NGO indicate that about 43,000 have been arrested by police, paramilitary, and army joint forces since the new government took office -- about 13,000 more than normal for that same period of time. Some 6,000 "political" detainees -- those swept up in the current drive against corrupt and violent political figures -- appear to remain in custody, mostly in jails and police stations. Approximately 19 custodial deaths have been reported.

¶6. (C) According to two lawyers representing detainees and one mid-level police officer, the "political" arrests are under the authority of the Special Powers Act and no detainee has been specifically charged or produced before a magistrate court. There is no visibly increased activity at magistrates' courts, and no petition to the High Court asking for bail or stays. The location of many of the detainees is unknown. According to the Special Powers Act, "preventive detention" is authorized for anyone to prevent "prejudicial acts" against very broadly defined state interests; detainees are supposed to be informed within 15 days of the grounds for

their detention.

Comment

¶7. (C) The government is reportedly poised to detain more than 400 hundred other "big fish," which if confined to politicians would presumably gut the parliamentary members of both parties. The most dramatic would be Zia's son, Tariq, since it could conceivably lead to major fissures within the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and provide the government with significant leverage over Zia. Public focus will soon shift to what happens next with the detainees. Will they be released after questioning, or will they be squeezed to inform on colleagues, formally charged, prosecuted, and effectively barred from politics? For now, however, Bangladeshis are savoring the moment and daring to hope that notorious leaders from both political parties will finally be brought to justice and signal the emergence of a new political culture in Bangladesh.

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